

Janis L. Dickinson: Hydrofracking poses a threat

By JANIS L. DICKINSON Guest commentary Monterey County Herald

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① I write with some urgency about horizontal hydrofracking. The Monterey shale has huge deposits of natural gas and is currently a major target of exploration efforts.

② Vertical hydrofracking has been done since the 1950s, but the type of fracturing required to obtain natural gas from shale is called "horizontal hydrofracking" and is newer. This mode of hydrofracking was rendered feasible by the "Halliburton loophole" in George W. Bush's energy bill, which exempted horizontal hydrofracking from the Clean Water Act and allowed companies involved in fracking to keep their trade secrets, which means that they do not have to disclose the types of chemicals (up to 250) they pump into the ground.

③ Water and chemicals are dispersed in water and pumped into the ground to fracture shale to free natural gas. Fracking chemicals have killed livestock, set water taps on fire and sickened people in Pennsylvania, where the Marcellus shale development has been greatest.

④ Flyovers with sensors detect large methane gas releases from wells, which are spewed over the rural landscape. This type of gas drilling is anything but clean, is not subject to full disclosure of dangers, and is like nothing we've experienced anywhere before. Early signs indicate a dispersed industrialization of rural landscapes that renders our most pristine areas barely livable and causes air pollution (methane release) as well as migration of chemicals and leaking storage ponds, poisoning well water and streams. Side effects include costly degradation of roads because of industrial-level transportation.

⑤ People were very naive in the East and even leading scientists and conservation biologists were lured into leasing rights to their property. This is because the energy companies were allowed to obtain leases without full disclosure of the impacts. New York state has a moratorium in place and has banned fracking in the regions that supply water to New York City. This indicates a recognition of the dangers of fracking. But rural communities in the beautiful Finger Lakes region do not receive such protection. It is not clear that bans imposed at the township level will hold up in court. A large public rally is planned for the state capital to continue the moratorium at a time when the state itself is under severe financial pressure. And of course, as always, there are people who support fracking because of short-term financial gains.

⑥ Residents of Monterey County should act now. Here more than elsewhere, horizontal hydrofracking will be devastating to our fragile and insufficient water supplies, nationally important agricultural businesses and our quality of life.

⑦ If Pennsylvania is experiencing earthquakes in the vicinity of gas drilling, what might happen to California? Already, friends of mine in New York cannot refinance their homes because they have leased their land. Others cannot sell. In California, most people's retirement income resides in real property. This could be put at risk if fracking efforts increase in Monterey County.

⑧ Even if you do not lease your land, if enough of your neighbors do, your property could be subject to compulsory integration into the drilling effort. Our state, usually on top of environmental issues, is woefully behind on this one. While Gov. Jerry Brown is asking for full disclosure of chemicals and fracking sites, this is not enough. I suggest that a moratorium period is needed to fully investigate the issue, and I believe that solid investigation will support the need for a ban to protect our agricultural heritage, biodiversity and the scenic beauty of Monterey County and, indeed, all regions of our state.